

S-E-C-R-E-T

16 June 1966

STAFF NOTE

SUBJECT: Food Problems in West Africa

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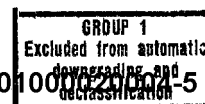
In O/NE Special Memorandum No. 8-66 of 20 May 1966, we pointed up the growing problem of food shortages in Africa. At Mr. Kent's urging we have looked more closely at the problem in West Africa. After some chasing after elusive statistical data, [] has produced the attached Staff Note.

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Over the next several years the growing lag of home production behind the demand for food of the urban population is likely to loom larger as a potential cause of political instability -- although admittedly just one among many operating in West Africa. At the least, the dependence of the region on imported foods to satisfy the appetites of its townsfolk will continue to rise.

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Some General Observations

1. In the first instance the food problem in West Africa is an urban problem. The 80 percent or so of the population engaged in subsistence farming or hunting in each country makes do on its traditionally poor diet, through good years and lean, without much affecting the national economy or governmental policy. But in the growing cities and towns the new black elite, the burgeoning bureaucracy, and even the rag-picking poor place heavy demands on commercial supplies of foodstuffs. The heart of the matter is the tendency of African townspeople, from the very poor to the moderately well-to-do, to spend the bulk of any increment in income on expanding the quantity and upgrading the

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quality of their diet. This means increased demands not only for cassava and other native starches but also for wheat bread and beer and other European foodstuffs that have always been in short supply in the region.

2. Ultimately, of course, the food problem is a rural one: in most countries the output of West African farmers is not keeping pace even with the growth of population, much less with the swiftly rising demand for food in urban areas. The key to the shortfall in food production is neither land shortage nor, at this stage, inadequate technology; it is lack of incentives. Many farmers are too remotely located to respond to or even know of the increased demand for the fruits of their labor. But even in areas adjacent to urban centers and established trade routes, government price, tax, and credit policies usually encourage the large producer of export crops and ignore or penalize the small food grower.

3. In truth, evidence of governmental concern for increasing food output would just be the beginning. A complicated set of cultural and economic factors would have to be altered, yet kept in phase, before large numbers of small farmers would strive consistently to produce beyond their own needs. For one thing, scarce nonfood goods and educational and other services would have to be made available to the farmers on reasonably favorable

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terms. In societies where both the capable government official and the citizen dedicated to the national weal are at a premium, the shift to commercial food production would not come painlessly. Witness the recent hoarding and wild rises in urban food prices in Nigeria, where the government, encouraged by the US AID Mission, is trying to speed the transformation of agriculture.

4. Most West African governments, rather than risk the considerable uncertainties of stimulating home production, turn instead to increased imports to assure that adequate foodstuffs are on hand in urban areas. In most countries food imports have shot up by 50 to 100 percent since 1960. Countries that were largely self-sufficient before independence are becoming increasingly dependent upon foreign supplies of food for satisfying the appetites of the populations of their politically sensitive cities and towns. What is more, the expediency of increasing imports merely reinforces the basic problem; by keeping food prices down, imports encourage continued rapid growth of urban demand while depressing the desire of farmers to grow a marketable surplus.

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Where to Worry the Least and the Most

5. West Africa's food problems are bound to get worse over the next decade.* In a sense, underdevelopment is a cruel master: the lack of stimulation of the countryside deters any substantial movement toward economic development and political maturity; yet these in turn are prerequisites for tackling the problem of rural stagnation. For the short term the ability of the individual countries to pay for increased food imports will be the key issue. Thus, the food problem is least likely to become a major cause of instability in those countries that have a reasonably favorable trade balance and whose export earnings have been keeping pace with purchases of food abroad. In the Ivory Coast, for example, both food imports and export earnings have more than doubled since 1960; ability to pay for foods has at the least held even. Cameroon, Gabon, and Liberia fall into the same category.

* It is well to remember, however, that there is no food crisis in West Africa in the sense that India has a crisis, and that the total food imports of the region carry little weight in world trade tables (e.g., during fiscal 1965, less than 2 percent of US PL-480 foods were shipped to West Africa).

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6. In contrast, in several countries already heavily dependent upon foreign assistance, exports have been stagnating or declining while food imports have been surging ahead. Any loss of favor with the foreign patron in these countries might quickly open the way for a major food shortage in urban areas. Senegal's food imports jumped by over 50 percent from 1962 to 1964. Exports increased not a sou, but the French dole had to be hiked by better than \$10 million.

7. The US has already picked up one such costly account in Guinea and may be on its way toward possession of another in Mali. In both of these radical states, doctrinaire economic policies have depressed not only export earnings but also food production. Guinea, a country with some considerable economic potential, has been digging its way deeper into a hole since 1961. It no longer can feed the citizens of Conakry without the generous shipments of rice from the US under PL-480. For 1966, some 50,000 metric tons of rice have been requested, over 30 pounds for every man, woman, and child in the country. Mali, with little of value to export, has been an international beggar since it bolted the franc zone in 1962. Food crops were particularly poor in 1964 and again in 1965; imports shot up; and the US picked up a large part of the tab.

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8. In Ghana and in Nigeria, the two most economically advanced countries in West Africa, the situation has only lately taken a turn for the worse. In both the endurance of reasonably moderate regimes will depend in good measure on how well they handle the food problem. Nkrumah's policies finally caught up with Ghana in 1965; exports continued downward and food production fell for the first time. After casting out the Nkrumah regime, Ghana asked for and is receiving substantial US PL-480 assistance. Hopefully, it may only be needed for a short period. Nigeria, in spite of advancing export earnings, has been reducing its food imports since 1962-1963. Partly because of bad weather and partly because of political turmoil the harvest in late 1965 -- early 1966 was poor. Although US assistance would probably have been made available, the Nigerian government chose instead to let food prices rise in hopes of stimulating a bumper crop during the upcoming harvest. The price rises have been much steeper than anticipated, however, and have contributed to a growing disaffection with the regime.

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